

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Diverse cultural backgrounds embraced in military service

By Sgt. 1st Class Theanne Herrmann
SDNG Public Affairs Office

America is a gathering of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and one place you will see it all blend together is in today's military. Wearing the uniform of the United States Armed Forces brings a collaboration and unity among people of different backgrounds, all working toward the goal of protecting freedom.

"Being a part of the National Guard culture is one area where we can all say we are the same - regardless of race or gender," said 1st Lt. Carstin Jerzak, SDNG state equal employment manager. "Members of the South Dakota National Guard are typically known for their mid-western work ethic passed from generation to generation. This work ethic comes from making a living in the Midwest and is reflected in our families and in those serving in the Guard."

The majority of SDNG members were born and raised in South Dakota, but not all. Many have a reason for joining the military and many were influenced by their cultural upbringing.

The following five individuals were inspired to serve in the SDNG due to their heritage.

Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Clinton Store

Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Clinton Store is an African American who grew up in the inner city of Chicago.

"I had a pretty tough upbringing," said Store, a member of Joint Force Headquarters, in Rapid City. "That has made me the person and Soldier that I am. I wouldn't be where I am without the struggles, the pain or the people who supported me."

His military inspiration came from knowing his grandfather served in World War II and gained personal exposure during high school through ROTC.

"I knew there was more to life than just the things happening around me every day," said Store. "My family supported my idea of joining the Army, but my environment did not. I actually had people tell me that 'the Army ain't no place for a black man', which I thought was funny, because when I went to basic training all the drill sergeants were black."

The military is a community in which where you come from and what you look like is not important, rather how you perform is what distinguishes you, added Store.

“They give you a uniform and teach you how to be a Soldier,” said Store. “I would have never imagined that I would be sitting here today as a chief warrant officer 3. They give you the tools to build a better you, but it’s up to you to use them.”

Store met his wife, from South Dakota, while serving on active duty. This ultimately led him to South Dakota and to the SDNG.

There are many differences between life on the south side of Chicago and life in South Dakota, said Store.

“People in South Dakota are generally very trusting and willing to engage in conversation with a stranger,” said Store. “In my Chicago neighborhoods, we limit interactions with people we don’t know.”

Store said just one interesting cultural difference is the way people worship in church.

“It’s not just an hour-long sermon,” Store said, of his church services growing up. “It’s an all-day event or whenever the shouting stops. There is nothing wrong with either way, it’s just different.”

Store said he appreciates the boldness of his culture, shown in the way they express themselves.

“I think that the boldness of some people from my upbringing goes hand-in-hand with the military,” said Store. “You have to be bold and brave to wear this uniform. You need to be willing to take some risks and stand up for what is right in difficult situations.”

Air Force Master Sgt. Regina Staufer

Air Force Master Sgt. Regina Staufer was born in the Philippines and became an American citizen through the naturalization process at the age of 10.

Staufer, who is part Chinese, Filipino and Spanish, serves in the 114th Fighter Wing as a superintendent in the chapel operations section.

She comes from a military family, her grandfather and uncle both retired from the U.S. Navy.

“After high school graduation my grandfather advised me to join the military or get a full-ride scholarship to college,” said Staufer, who enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and reported to her first duty station at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona.

It was at Davis-Monthan that she would meet her husband, from Watertown, whose ancestry is German.

Staufer spent four years on active-duty working in base security until deciding to join the National Guard, while her husband stayed active.

The Staufer family has traveled to various active-duty Air Force bases throughout their careers and now Ellsworth AFB is the last move in her husband’s career.

Staufer has been able to keep her National Guard status going by transferring from state to state, wherever her husband is stationed.

“I’m thankful for this amazing opportunity to serve the greatest armed forces in the world,” said Staufer. “As a female American of Asian-Pacific descent, this is a truly remarkable experience.”

In her native country, females serving in the military is a rarity. Most still pursue traditional female-orientated careers such as nurses and teachers, said Staufer.

“I’d like to continue to encourage and empower women of different ethnicities to dare to break from the norm,” said Staufer. “I view being in the military as being a guardian – we are the protector of our state, nation and its citizens. It’s a humbling experience to be a servant of the people.”

Serving in the military for the Staufer family is a tradition that is still going strong. Their son Andrew is currently serving in the SDANG’s 114th Maintenance Group.

Army Sgt. Alex Gigov

Army Sgt. Alex Gigov moved to South Dakota from Bulgaria at the age of 24 to attend college at Northern State University in Aberdeen.

“I grew up in a big city so I wanted to do something different,” said Gigov, a member of the 155th Engineer Company. “I applied to several colleges and I chose Northern because they were the most professional in communicating with me and the people were kind.”

Gigov met his wife, Robin, during his time in college and it was her father who influenced him to join the SDNG.

“My father-in-law, Bill Campbell, was very inspirational in my decision to join the Guard,” said Gigov. “He is a man of great integrity.”

Campbell received the Purple Heart while serving in the Vietnam War and earned the rank of first sergeant before retiring from the SDNG with 22 years of service.

Enlisting in the SDNG was not the first time Gigov experienced the military.

“At the time in Bulgaria, once you reach the age of 18 you were required to join the military,” said Gigov. “I served for 18 months.”

After serving in the Bulgarian military, Gigov went on to experience a variety of jobs to include working on a cruise ship and a hotel in Israel.

I’ve worked with a lot of different nationalities, which I believe will be helpful during my deployment,” said Gigov.

Gigov will deploy with the 155th to Kuwait for one year in support of Operation Enduring Freedom – Spartan Shield.

“I have an understanding of how others perceive the world,” said Gigov. “I believe it has helped me understand that we can’t afford to be ignorant we have to respect each other.”

Gigov said he is grateful to live in the United States of America.

“A lot of people ask me when was the last time I was home,” said Gigov. “I say this morning, home is where the heart is. I don’t have a lot of ties to Bulgaria anymore. South Dakota is my home.”

Army Pfc. Eldena Sharp Fish

Army Pfc. Eldena Sharp Fish grew up on South Dakota’s Rosebud Indian Reservation.

“I grew up in a two-room house,” said Sharp Fish, a member of the 109th Regional Support Group. “We had no running water and we used an outhouse up until I was 18 years old.”

Sharp Fish’s first language is Lakota. It wasn’t until she went to speech class in kindergarten that she learned to speak English.

“Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, who we called Uncici, said Sharp Fish. “Uncici had a lot to offer with her stories, hugs and love. She helped me to learn and we were taught life’s lesson’s through storytelling. Our number one rule is to always listen to our elders.”

Sharp Fish credits her family’s history in the military for the reason she decided to leave the reservation and become a Soldier at the age of 35.

Sharp Fish comes from a long line of military veterans to include her dad who served during World War II.

“I remember being inspired to join the military when my brothers came home in their uniform looking sharp,” said Sharp Fish. “They were fulfilling our family’s legacy of serving. I wanted to be a part of that.”

Sharp Fish said she is not alone in her decision to join the military. A lot of other families on the reservation have sons or daughters who are serving, which in their culture holds a lot of respect.

“Being a part of the military means carrying on a tradition that my dad and brothers have carried,” said Sharp Fish. “I’m happy I’m able to be a part of this and hopefully my daughters or grandsons will join too. It’s a tradition that goes on and on. It’s not a Native American, white or black thing, it has nothing to do with race - it’s something honorable that anyone can do. Being native, I feel the same way as anyone else, we are all here in uniform to protect everybody for the common good of all people.”

Army Lt. Col. John Weber

Army Lt. Col. John Weber, while half Puerto Rican and half German, grew up with a Hawaiian influence.

“It was my great grandparents on my mom’s side who migrated from Puerto Rico to Hawaii around 1903 to work in the sugar cane and pineapple plantations,” said Weber, a member of Joint Force Headquarters. “I wouldn’t say my family is considered native Hawaiian, but my family has grown up with the Hawaiian culture.”

His father met his mother while stationed in Hawaii serving in the Navy.

“I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, and then we moved to Ethan, South Dakota, when I was five years old,” said Weber. “I like to cook food inspired by Hawaii and Puerto Rico for my family. One of the foods we continue to cook that is different from what most people in South Dakota eat is octopus.”

Weber’s family has a tradition of serving in the military.

“My grandfather was one of 21 children which included 11 boys and 10 girls. All of the boys served in the military and they were very proud of their service,” said Weber. “My grandfather served in World War II and retired from the Hawaii Army National Guard with over 30 years of service. The Puerto Rican culture has a lot of pride for those associated in the military, and I wanted to carry that on by serving.”

Weber says the military has come a long way in embracing everyone’s different ethnicities.

“If you look at my grandfather’s military records, he could only check whether he was black or white,” said Weber. “Even when I joined 29 years ago, there were only a few more options so I just identified myself with my white half. Today, I can check the Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander/White box with the ethnicity of Puerto Rico.”

It’s important today to not only accept, but to truly understand more about others unique backgrounds, said Weber.

“I can understand that it’s important to be open and embrace everyone’s background and understand they are still learning too,” said Weber. “I am still learning to this day about my own background. Everyone has a different perspective. I may view things differently because how my family views things coming from Hawaii versus someone here in South Dakota.”

All five of these service members have a unique cultural upbringing, but the commonality between all them is their family’s strong tradition of service and their love of protecting their local community, state and nation, said Jerzak.

“The foundation of diversity is about finding common ground and similarities, as well as considering differences,” said Jerzak. “It is easier to cross boundaries once we determine what we have in common instead of focusing on what we don’t.”

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High resolution photos below are available upon request.



Army CW3 Clinton Store (U.S. Army National Guard file photo/Released)



Army Pfc. Eldena Sharp Fish (U.S. Army National Guard file photo/Released)



Air Force Master Sgt. Regina Staufer (U.S. Army National Guard file photo/Released)



Army Sgt. Alex Gigov (U.S. Army National Guard file photo/Released)



Army Lt. Col. John Weber (U.S. Army National Guard file photo/Released)

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